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World Chronicle

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WORLD POPULATION

Dr. Nafis SADIK, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), discusses population and women's issues. Investment in people is the key to sustainable economic growth and development and to sustainable, balanced population growth. Education is a vital element in large families and poverty. Reproductive and sexual health needs should be an integral part of family planning programmes. The fertility rate in developing countries has declined from 6.1 children per family in the 1950s to 3.7 today. The AIDS epidemic has adversely affected health care systems in many developing countries. Dr. Sadik believes that, in spite of the progress made, women continue to be under-represented in the political process. Dr. Sadik also pointed out that UNFPA enjoys strong financial support from the donor countries.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

As we approach the end of the century, world population is expected to exceed 6 billion people, with an increase of 1 billion in this decade alone. With exploding populations and resources already depleted, many countries, especially third world nations, may not be able to realize the economic and social development indispensable for the advancement of humanity and the survival of future generations.

To address population issues, with us today is Dr. Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund, or UNFPA. And joining me to talk with Dr. Sadik are Ian Williams of the *Tribune* of London and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times*. Dr. Sadik, welcome to World Chronicle.

SADIK: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Sadik, if the world population is increasing at the rate of a billion in every decade, or at least it's expected to increase by a billion in the coming decade, does that mean that UNFPA has not been successful in its mission?

SADIK: Well, certainly it doesn't mean that. I think that if you look at the statistics from the time that we came into operation in 1969, that the size of the world's families has reduced from over 6 children per family to about 3.4 today. That's almost halved. Contraceptive prevalence, which was very low — it was something like 6 or 7 per cent in the developing world — has increased to over 57 per cent today. And family planning programmes, which were available only to a very small number of people, and where policies existed in a very small number of countries, are now virtually available in every developing country of the world. It's a very sensitive topic, and it took a while to get the subject accepted by governments and introduced in programmes.

LITTLEJOHNS: When is the population growth rate likely to level off, according to your projections?

SADIK: Well, as you saw in the Cairo Conference in 1994, there are three —

LITTLEJOHNS: That's the Population Conference.

SADIK: The Population Conference. There are three scenarios for world population. There is the medium projection, which is considered the most likely, in which the population is likely to stabilize at 10.5 or 11 billion people in about 75 years from now. There is the high scenario, which I think is unlikely, in which the population, if nothing happened, if growth rates didn't go down, would continue to grow until it increased to, say, like 20 or 22 billion.

LITTLEJOHNS: 22 billion!

SADIK: Which is highly unlikely. I mean, I think it's — I mean —

LITTLEJOHNS: But in 75 years?

SADIK: No, over a hundred and something years it would continue to grow. But the low projection scenario is that the world population could stabilize at 7.5 or 8 billion people by the year 2050. And that is the scenario that we should be aiming for, and which the Cairo Population and Development Conference recommendations tried to aim for. And even if we slipped, let's say, in that low population scenario, we could perhaps stabilize at 8.5, even 9, still much better than the 11 which is the most likely projection.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is there an estimate of the maximum number that this planet could sustain?

SADIK: Well, the planet — people say that now the planet is over-populated. I think it's not a question of the number that the planet can sustain, but under what conditions or in what conditions will people live at different population projections. Because even now you see the different levels of living in the different countries of the world. The poorest countries have the lowest standards of living, they have the highest rates of population growth, and they're the ones that are least able to improve the living conditions for their population. So what will happen is that death rates will rise, people will live in poor health, poor environments, et cetera, in famine and so on.

LITTLEJOHNS: So life expectancy will actually fall.

SADIK: Will start to fall, which we saw for a short time in the African scene in the 1980s as well, yes.

WILLIAMS: To some extent there's a chicken and egg situation here —

SADIK: Yes.

WILLIAMS: — because the pattern is that as people become more affluent they also become more sort of self-restrained, they have fewer children. So in the industrialized countries of Europe the actual indigenous population is either stable or even shrinking, to the horror of some of the people there. But on the other hand you're saying that in the developing world they have to reduce population to increase living standards. How do you —

SADIK: No, I don't think that that's what —

WILLIAMS: How do you break out of that scenario?

SADIK: Yes, I think that what is being suggested to countries, and which countries accept, is that there should be a balance between their rate of population growth and their prospects for economic and social progress. The historical perspective of what happened to demography in industrialized countries is not relevant for the countries of today because of

the time perspective. It took hundreds of years for this demographic transition to take place in the industrialized countries, and never, never did they have growth rates of more than 2 per cent. You know, that's quite an interesting phenomenon to note, because in the developing countries of today, growth rates have increased to 3 and 4 per cent, and there are a few countries with even higher than 4 per cent recorded growth rate. So it's quite a different perspective.

Secondly, the mortality levels in the developing countries came down very dramatically, while in the industrialized countries the mortality reduction, the decline, took place over many years, and it took place not because of quick actions — antibiotics and so on — but it took place because there was a change in the lifestyle and the understanding of health issues and so on. And along that, which — you know, it meant improving in the environment, in the living conditions, which also made for prosperity elsewhere, and then, you know, the consideration for children and so on. So it was quite a different set of factors that influenced the demographic transition in the developed societies. But interestingly, even there, in many countries, fertility declined before mortality. So, you know, it was quite — in England and Wales, for example, the fertility decline follows very much the pattern of mortality decline. In France, fertility, in fact, is slightly preceding mortality decline. So there's not a set pattern, except that there is a demographic transition that is taking place everywhere, and it's taking place today. And it's much faster in the developing countries of today than it ever was in the industrialized societies.

CROSSETTE: One of the interesting things to come out of Cairo and, I think, a fascinating trend that was then confirmed in Beijing is the tremendous growth of women's organizations and women's movements in the developing world. Is this going to make the job easier of getting the message across, and more effective family planning programmes?

SADIK: Undoubtedly. You know, one of the theses upon which we based the Cairo recommendations was that if we had really listened to individuals, and particularly women, what they wanted, then we would probably find that the world population would be at a lower level, and in countries populations would be much lower. Because in every region of the world, even Africa, sub-Saharan African region, women want fewer children than they have. They want children that they can look after, nurture, and keep healthy and feed. So it may not be that they want to have two children only, for example, in Africa, but they don't want the six and seven children. And secondly, no woman wants to be in a continuing state of pregnancy. She wants a space between her last pregnancy, even if she wants four or five children. Just those two factors alone would have made a tremendous difference.

But what was the situation? It was really that governments had their own ideological positions, they had their religious groups, they had their personal views and, finally, they

didn't really care, because it was women. And therefore they really — in so many countries contraception was banned, family planning was given very low priority, and, in fact, maternal health, which is — maternity is so revered, and yet maternal health was given such low priority. And in Cairo the thesis was that we must really listen to individuals; if we respond to their needs you will find that they will have children that they want.

Secondly, in order to respond to needs you must improve the status of women, because even in countries where there is access to information and services, women are not always able to use those services because the decisions on reproduction are made by husbands and the family and the societal coercion that goes on to have a son. I was just listening to a story before we came on the programme which was that somebody wanted a son and had six daughters before he had a son — you know, that kind of thing. So you have to change the role of women, empower them to make decisions for themselves. And secondly, in the ICPD, in Cairo, women's empowerment became a very central focus. And so I believe that the decisions that have been reached, or the recommendations that have been agreed upon in Cairo, and in fact furthered in Beijing, will help a lot to move the population problem towards resolution, but also will move and advance development and will advance the attention to environmental issues. So all in all, it's a win-win situation.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Women's Conference, as you pointed out, was held in Beijing. Now, China has a policy I believe of one child per family. Isn't that rather Draconian, as a means of holding down the population?

SADIK: Well, yes, I think so. It is a policy that is difficult for them even to implement. As they say, the policy is voluntary, but the acceptance of it is really not. I mean, it's not fully accepted except in the urban areas, where in fact the size of the family is one and maybe even none, because many families are not having any children. But in the rural areas the size of the family is two or three, sometimes even more. So the average size of the Chinese population is about 2.2 or 2.3 children per family. The Chinese, of course, believe that unless their population figures stabilize they're going to have very great difficulty in feeding their population. And there is, of course, some indication of that now. They've had to start importing food, and so on. But I think they themselves realized, after the International Conference on Population, and now the Beijing Conference, that they have to re-examine their policies.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Women's Conference in Beijing had rather mixed reviews. Do you think it was a success?

SADIK: Oh, I think it was a great success. It was a great success for several reasons. One is that there was such a large number of women that came from all over the world. Many of them really came with their agenda and found that there were lots of other

people all around the world that had the same problem. So there was very good networking. There were different points of view represented there, and yet the discussion was quite sound, substantively. And I think there was a lot of interchange between different points of view. In the discussions and in the final set of recommendations that were accepted in the platform for action, in fact, there are some things that were very strong. For example, in the case of reproductive and sexual health, the rights of women to determine their own decisions.... In so many countries, you know, men have marital rights, and therefore women have to sub — what do you call it? sub — ?

LITTLEJOHNS: Submit

SADIK: Yes, submit to them. And this was recognized as against the basic rights of women. And one of the most important things that came out of Beijing was that human rights apply to women and men, and that women's rights are human rights. And I think that was a very powerful message that came out. Also, I was very impressed with the way they finally came to a better recommendation on the question of adolescent health, adolescent reproductive rights and sexual health and education. It went further than in Cairo, where in fact there was a lot of — you know, parental rights and duties much emphasized. But here it said that children's needs and adolescent needs take preference over rights. I mean, there's such a thing as rights, but that it is the responsibility of society to help and protect children. And I think that's a very important recommendation that also came out. And then violence against women was very much recognized, and I think this is the first time that in an international conference that violence both within the family and the society and elsewhere was very much recognized.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Dr. Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund.

WILLIAMS: Cairo seemed to be the high tide of the Vatican's influence. Without trampling on diplomatic and theological territory, would you say that their influ — that they seemed to sort of — that they seeme to have fallen back in Beijing by comparison with the Cairo Conference?

SADIK: Well, what happened in Cairo, I believe, was that the Vatican got a bit isolated. In the end, for example, the African countries were quite upset that it took two and a half days to agree on one paragraph while they wanted to discuss issues that they were more concerned about — you know, development and so on. And so in Beijing the Vatican took a very low key approach, and indeed informed everyone that they were not going to disturb the agreements that were reached at the ICPD in Cairo. They would only intervene, I suppose, if some people wanted to go further. And they're particularly concerned, of course, about abortion. And it was clear that abortion was not going to be reopened, at

least by the delegations, because it was not too long, you know, it was just a year ago that they'd come to some kind of agreement. And the language in the Cairo Conference on abortion allows all countries to act within their legal system on abortion, and yet says that unsafe abortion must be addressed, must be treated, and women must be treated sympathetically, and that everyone must be provided the alternative — that is, information on contraception and access to information and services. So I think the Vatican took a very low key role in Beijing, though they still had some views on the family and on rights and so on. There were still some of those undercurrents.

WILLIAMS: As well as trampling on the Vatican's cassock in the course of your events, I noticed in the world population report, the State of World Population that you publish, you have a large section on female genital mutilation. So, you're treading on other traditionalist practices. To what extent are you prepared to accept the arguments that we hear sometimes that you shouldn't interfere with traditional practices, no matter how barbaric?

SADIK: In the area of women's empowerment and addressing issues that concern women and their role in society, I think tradition and culture are used so often to just exactly do that. And my view was very openly stated, both in the ICPD in Cairo as well as in the Women's Conference in Beijing, that, yes, some tradition and culture is good, and we should embrace those, but wherever it subjugates any group or is anti- the freedom of any group, then we have to get rid of that tradition and culture and really move on. I think there's just no two ways about it.

On the subject of female genital mutilation, I think we were quite strong in Cairo. It was the first international conference that addressed that subject. And the recommendation, I myself was quite pleased with how strongly worded that recommendation is. And furthermore, I'm pleased with the follow-up to that recommendation. We have had now seminars all over, in all the regions, and we are in fact talking about — not talking, we are training our staff on how to be strong advocates for difficult issues and how to address them. And I'm not prepared to say that outsiders shouldn't say anything about it. I say, if someone is being killed and mutilated, what do you mean, outsiders shouldn't say anything about it? Everyone must speak up about it. And specially when within some societies they want to hide it. I think that this hiding and not being able to speak about these kinds of topics, like rape and incest, et cetera, is a way to condone it. I think we have to talk about it, we have to speak out about it, and we must do whatever we can to change it.

CROSSETTE: Another difficult issue is the spread of AIDS, and this is of course becoming increasingly a problem in the developing nations, where people can least afford to deal with it — Africa; and now one hears India will be the next country to be the focus of a

huge epidemic. Is this also part of what you'd like people to talk a little bit more about? Because many young girls, children even, get involved in this, and they bring home to villages all over the Himalayas HIV infections.

SADIK: Absolutely. I think that as far as HIV-AIDS is concerned, in so many societies, especially south Asia, there is still a silence about it. They pretend it doesn't exist. They think that there's no extra-marital, as they say it, "relationships". And they're just — you know, sort of hoodwinking themselves. I believe that now, with the last conference that was held in Malaysia on HIV-AIDS, there's been a big shock to many of the countries as they start to see that this epidemic is really going to be something that they will not be able to control. And now I think people — the government and many other women's groups and health groups — are opening up. Again, it's — you know, sex and sexuality and sexual activities are so — I don't know — have been given such a false sense of this honour and privacy and so on, I mean, I think it should be private and so on, but not when it impinges on another individual or on the health of another individual or of the society as a whole.

CROSSETTE: And denial, sometimes denial.

SADIK: And denial, exactly, denial.

CROSSETTE: In the case of prostitution —

SADIK: Pretending that it doesn't exist. I mean, "In my society, it doesn't exist." And really, in every society we know this kind of behaviour exists. So this is something that we, as organizations, have to really address in a very forthright manner. And we have to have good public education programmes. They can be sensitive to the social norm, but still in many cases they have to address the behaviour. I mean, the behaviour in that society just has to be addressed. You can't sort of pretend it doesn't exist. And this is something that we are all engaged in. You know, we have sex organizations co-sponsoring now the AIDS programme, and UNFPA has a programme with UNESCO and WHO on AIDS education at different levels and through different media and sources, including the public information system. I mean, so many women are getting AIDS because really they don't know how they get it. And most of them are getting it, surprisingly, from their spouses.

CROSSETTE: You talked a little bit about south Asia, in passing, in some of these problems. When one looks at the Human Development Report, there are many areas in which south Asia seems to be slipping towards sub-Saharan Africa. And as we were mentioning earlier, sometimes development is held back by large population growth. What's the problem in south Asia? There've been some successes there and there've been some not-so-good stories.

SADIK: South Asia is the region which has had the longest history of population programmes — you know, policies and family planning programmes. But fewer successes,

rather uneven. The south of India is doing well. The north of India is doing less well, but certainly is still better than Pakistan. Bangladesh is doing better than Pakistan, but still, you know, not as well as it should do, because of its population. And you see the whole of the northern sub-continent, the northern part of the sub-continent has some common features — very feudalistic society, the status of women is very low, educational levels for women are extremely low, and in fact they verge on what exists in sub-Saharan Africa. Economic participation of women is also low. And their work is just not recognized, even though they do work in the rural areas. And then the access to information and services is non-existent as far as women are concerned. So, with this combination of factors, you can see that the success rate is going to be low. And then, added to that in the case of Pakistan, for example, there's been uneven political support. Several governments have not supported the empowerment of women, education, or family planning. The present Government is now making some effort, and let us hope that it will lead to something. In India also now they're making some renewed effort to do more in the social sectors, including addressing women's empowerment issues. And I hope that with the involvement of NGOs in all of the three countries —

LITTLEJOHNS: Non-governmental organizations.

SADIK: Non-governmental organizations in these three countries, that the pace of the decline and the acceptance of family planning will increase. I see some hope there.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Sadik, the United Nations system is passing through a very severe financial crisis. How is this affecting UNFPA? Are you way down in your funding?

SADIK: No, we are in fact up in our funding, surprisingly. After the International Conference [on Population and Development], all the major donors increased their support for UNFPA. We have in fact for 1995 an 18 per cent increase in our annual budget. This includes, of course, a contribution by the US of $35 million. You know, they came back to —

LITTLEJOHNS: They had stopped funding because of —

SADIK: They had stopped funding before.

LITTLEJOHNS: — the argument over abortion, wasn't it?

SADIK: Well, whatever the arguments.... But I think it was another government, and this administration has decided to fund us, and they are. But of course we are a bit worried about the current discussions in the US Congress, and we hope that there will be an amount for UNFPA. At the moment there is in one of the bills — well, in both the bills, but the amounts are different. But I believe that all the other donors are going to increase their support for the UNFPA directly, but also many of them are now channelling their bilateral programme funds through the UNFPA.

CROSSETTE: An interesting thing's happening, right? People are beginning to see that what used to be women's issues, social issues, are now becoming security issues.

SADIK: Absolutely. I think that one of the outcomes of this series of conferences has focused on the importance of involving all of the population, but particularly women; that empowering women affects future generations, it affects the present in terms of family planning, in terms of the environment, because women do so much of all of that. And the fact that perhaps women wouldn't take us toward that much — there's a big movement on I see in the women's movement to be much more involved in defence issues, in security issues, in their national decision-making as well, because —

WILLIAMS: But there's a drawback here. In eastern Europe a lot of women I've spoken to have said that the old regimes used to just talk about women's rights; the new regimes don't even talk about women's rights. So there's been some slipping back there, with the social safety nets going.

SADIK: Well, I think it's a mixed thing. Because what we have found in, for example, the east Asian republics of the former Soviet Union, also in Russia itself, in the Ukraine, in Belarus, is that women's health services are non-existent. Women don't have access to contraceptive services, for example; they just resort to abortion — they have 20, 30 abortions, some of them. You know, abortion is the method of planning of birth. And that the rights of women which we always thought were there really don't exist; it was sort of illusory. So I think that in China one hears some of this, that the free market system is pushing women out of the economic system, and I think there is some indication there. But, again, I think that's part of the international discrimination against women, when in fact as soon as there's economic prosperity you deal with men, even though the man may not be any good.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Sadik, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Dr. Nafis Sadik, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund. She was interviewed by Ian Williams of the *Tribune*, of London, and Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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